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INTELLECTUALISM VERSUS INTUITIONISM IN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY SINCE THE WAR

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After the war had broken out, and after the first emotions were subdued, and after a sufficient number of facts had been accumulated to justify the resumption of philosophical considerations, decidedly the most striking feature in the writings of those philosophers in France who felt that they could speak for the generations of reconstruction, was an unequivocal *meâ culpâ*. There was no pose in it, as if to win applause from the gallery by grandly acknowledging sins in the past and trying to gain absolution on the ground of this easy confession. No, the sincerity, the earnestness of those men is unmistakable. They say not only: "We have allowed ourselves to be misled;" they say emphatically: "It must not happen again!"

But by whom had France been misled? Some pointed to the politicians, whose criminal shortsightedness in leaving the country unprepared had rendered possible the formidable aggression by Germany. Some pointed to the industrial and commercial men of France, who had not kept pace with the rest of the world and who had allowed the so-called "peaceful" invasion of Germany before the war. And some also pointed to the financiers of France, who had been content to be clever bankers, and had made France rich in money only, and not in economic wealth.

But some went deeper than that. After all, when the government had asked to increase war appropriations, it had met with considerable reluctance—Why? The French people themselves had been willing to forsake material comfort and progress to devote themselves to peaceful, intellectual, and artistic pursuits, to discuss Symbolism and Realism, Cubism and Impressionism—Why? Now, they all had to pay dearly—Why?

According to a very representative group of men, the responsibility rested chiefly with the philosophers whose influence had induced the French people to enjoy a merely contemplative life while other nations were engaged in pursuits of material advantages and of conquest. Just as those philoso-

phers and statesmen, who shape public opinion in Germany had screwed up their people to a state of mad Pan-Germanism, so the philosophers and statesmen of France had lulled their people into a state of dangerous security. This involved not only a state of unpreparedness for the war as waged by Germany since 1914, but a perfect waste of good energy in vain and barren sophistications.

That nefarious philosophy, which must be eradicated, assumed different forms; chiefly three.

1. The first is a *sentimental socialism*, based on a naïve, if fine, belief in an international brotherhood—which the war proved to be, if not false in itself, surely far from realization at the present hour (Jaurès).

2. This Utopian socialism, which appealed especially to the masses, assumed in the bourgeois milieu—which claimed to stand on a level a little higher intellectually—the form of what has been called *Moralism*. Moralism is based upon the assumption that there exists a moral conscience, the same in all men, and that one can depend upon this moral sense, and that it cannot be altered in any nation, under any compulsion. What made things worse was that the French philosophers who, by this Moralism, fought materialism as suggested by scientific men, were very prone to point to German philosophers, especially to Kant. As a German was presented in France as the chief representative of that theory, one took for granted that it was actually prevailing in Germany. The fact, was, however, that Pan-Germanists had replaced the creeds of the moral imperative by their Pan-Germanist creed—but were very glad that the French believed that Kantian ethics still prevailed on the other side of the Rhine. Boutroux would be here the most typical name in France.¹

3. The third theory is the worst of all. Unfortunately it has the support of the man who won a tremendous prestige in France and abroad in recent years, Bergson. The theory is Intuitionism, and it is perfectly in line with sentimental Socialism and Moralism; indeed it seems to offer for them a metaphysical background. Intuitionism is anti-intellectualism, or if you prefer, subjectivism; it means a philosophy of personal fancy; in one word, it was just the kind of fluid philosophy, destructive of straight, rational, realistic, virile thought, that Germany could wish for France, a philosophy of unmanly sentimentality: nothing could be more deadly to France

¹ The fact that Boutroux has assailed German ethics since, does not change matters. One may be glad that he came to see at last; but Boutroux has never repudiated his own books yet.

than Intuitionism or Bergsonism. *Bergsonism*, in the eyes of the war generation, that is the enemy!²

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The most striking theoretical discussion hostile to Bergsonism is Julien Benda's vigorous *Sentiments de Critique* (1917). Benda opposes with absolute determination and perfect outspokenness the intellectualism of French thought from Descartes down, to that German thought (sincere, or meant simply to sidetrack an enemy nation), which always leaves something to intuition: In its best form, in post-Kantian transcendentalism, German thought attempts to explain more than human intellect can explain; therefore, it is bound to breed confusion and it has to resort to intuition instead of reason in order to get out of this confusion *somewhere*. "Without doubt, reality is obscure, mysterious at bottom, and no definite idea can exhaust the richness of it. But obscure notions, which are most of the time only confused or equivocal,—pseudo-ideas,—fail likewise to exhaust it, and they threaten, besides, to lead us astray." This quotation from Parodi sums up the contention of the whole energetic book. The introducers of Intuitionism in modern thought are the German Romanticists;—and France would have drifted away from its normal course entirely, had it not been for some men like Comte, Taine, and Ribot. Note that all theories which are not amenable to rational thought, are German: Intuitionism—the theory that might is right; Intuitionism—the theory of the superiority of man waging war; Intuitionism again—the theory of the right of one race to rule over others; and Intuitionism—the theory of State opposed to individual. But, of

² It is only fair to say that Bergsonism may be interpreted differently. It was interpreted in a different sense by Péguy, and by young men like Lanux, who emphasized the Pragmatic side of that philosophy. Péguy says: "It is a prejudice, but it is an absolute, ineradicable prejudice, which demands that an inflexible reason should be more a reason than a flexible one. . . . It is evident, on the contrary, that it is the elastic and flexible methods, flexible logic, and flexible morals, which are the most severe, as they adhere the more closely to their object. . . . An inflexible morality may permit crimes to escape from its recesses, while on the contrary, a flexible morality will hold, denounce, and pursue the sinuities of those things which seek to escape." One may answer, however, "Yes, but if it is so elastic, Bergsonism may as well shelter Bernardism. . . . If Intuitionism requires no rational principles of justice, for instance, why then not as well Might (with the Germans) as Right (with the Allies)? One may venture to say that, had Péguy lived, he would have seen this, and with his characteristic frankness and honesty, written a *Cahier* sharply repudiating his utterances of 1914.

course, Intuitionism—one may say, by definition—works both ways, *all* ways; it works in an imperialistic direction when handled by German statesmen, it works for the pulverization of energies when handled by the subtle mind of a metaphysician of the type of Bergson.³

Benda had a particular right to crush Bergson unmercifully. His is not the case of the man who plays the prophet after the event; for he had before the war, voiced his protest against Bergson fetishism (see his *Bergsonisme ou une Philosophie de la Mobilité*).

Benda goes to the bitter end, for he is not quite sure whether Bergsonism *can* be swept away. "We may still witness," he says, "a detestation of a critical spirit for the benefit of lyricism, as the world has never seen it yet . . . without counting the support that such men will be ready to give who see their reputation involved in it, I mean that army of writers who *font de la vibration* but never have the shadow of an idea. This is not very gay for such as only know how to understand." Remark also the significant words: "It is a serious matter to see the official thinkers of a nation, using their authority since the beginning of the war, to endorse errors which they know to be errors; but with which they know that they please their countrymen. . . . And more serious still, to find that the vogue of those thinkers depends now upon such subservience." And still more direct, "B. and B. (Boutroux and Bergson) take good care not to pass judgment on such ideas. . . ."

So, let us change our ways of thinking, and, before all, as regards the war: "The mastery of war, like that of all that is getting more complex, must rely less and less exclusively on art, and more and more on science. Art is entirely master in some matters, only when those matters are still in the stage of infancy. . . . The reason why one wants genius to be always supreme—so that one may expect everything from it—is first, because it allows us to hope for a speedy solution, . . . a little because it flatters laziness; but especially because of that régime of aestheticism in favor today, which lends religion only to phenomena of the instinct and of spontaneity, and considers as of a rather gross nature the will based on system and organization. . . . Would it be allowable to say that under present circumstances a *renverse-*

³Words must not mislead us. For example, one speaks often of the *mysticism* of Péguy; but that would mean, in the mind of the young Frenchman, only that Péguy defended with a mystic ardor ideas that were based on so strong rational arguments that there could remain no doubt about their truth; it is Descartes' idea that plain, *rational* evidence is the criterion of truth.

ment des valeurs would seem desirable?" Benda means *Renversement of Intuitionism in favor of Intellectualism*.

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A book of the same order as Benda's is René Lote's *Les Leçons Intellectuelles de la Guerre* (1917). The author of *Les Origines Mystiques de la Science Allemande* (1913), *Du Christianisme au Germanisme* (which he says was written in 1911, although published in 1914), is only, if possible, more pitiless than Benda against those who, in his opinion, have poisoned French intellectualism with fanciful metaphysicism. The whole volume is an ardent plea for return to clear, sensible thinking, as existed during the seventeenth and eighteenth French century; it is a thorough attack against Romanticism, and beyond it against Rousseau-sentimentalism: the latter's obscure thought makes of the Ego the center of the world and justifies passion.

The book is dedicated to Seillière; it continues the trend of thought inaugurated by Seillière, Lasserre, and Maurras, or even before them by Brunetière, Bourget, and Lemaître. But, in some way, the note is different from that of the forerunners of twenty or ten years ago. It is not a narrow-minded attack on scientists whose theories were interpreted in terms of materialism in ethics, nor is it made to be a furious attack based on passion rather than on sober argumentation. Lote hits dry, direct, hard. Also he traces the evil much farther back than Benda, farther back than even Edgar Quinet had done; further back than Treitschke, further back even than Fichte. In Lote's opinion one must go back to the eighteenth century: Elizabeth of Russia was merely using flattery towards the Frenchmen of the age of Rationalism, and made them only believe that all Europe was in admiration before the clever geniuses of France; the same is true of Frederick the Great and his so-called protection of Frenchmen of letters exiled from France because of their advanced ideas (Voltaire, Diderot, etc.). Those bourgeois monarchs really got the best of French vanity, and by astutely flattering them rendered them harmless. There are some remarkably suggestive pages; for instance, when Lote points out "the idyllic *bonhomie* of the old Gessner," preparing the sentimental Germany which could be used later to conceal, provisionally, from the outside world the lusty beast of Belgian invasion; or the pages on the "austere criticism" of Lessing, which was meant to ruin the prestige which French classical literature had enjoyed in Germany; or again when Lote points out especially Goethe, who has

been "worked with great skill,"—the "European" Goethe, who was presented to France to prove that in the eyes of Germany there was but one Europe; the "Olympian" Goethe, representing a civilization where one lives above the low and human aims of domination and conquest; or again the "Bourgeois" Goethe, poet of Hermann and Dorothea, who would serve so well to deceive the French with the good-heartedness of Goethe, . . . Goethe plays a symbolic part in the "illusions" of the French people, and has contributed more than any other to make them "heedless (*étourdis*) apostles of mediocre Germany:" Let, therefore, France stop falling on her knees before the "romanesque adventure of the alchemist Faust."

Elsewhere Lote sees, behind the constant study of Romance philology by German scholars, a distinctly unfriendly purpose; namely, they wish to undermine the national feeling, in showing, in French literature and in the various dialects of the country, the trace of entirely different races, which have just *accidentally* been united under one political rule. Here they were Celts, there Wallons, there Provençaux. . . . In dismembering France politically, one would just do the natural thing.

What about philosophy and metaphysics? Nobody was more pleased, of course, than German leaders to see French scholars advocating an impassive and disinterested science on the one hand, and on the other, absorbing themselves in aimless erudition. In the meanwhile, German science simply identified its purposes with those of imperialistic Pan-Germanism. They used their science and their brains to perfect Krupp works while French philosophers outdid Kant and old-time German philosophers in metaphysical acrobatics; while they taught Treitschke and Bernardi to their students, the French besieged the chair of the intuitionistic metaphysician Bergson: Bergson again has to bear the burden of reproach.

There are two imperialisms threatening the world: *Pan-Germanism*, wishing to reign by might of arms, and the gentle, evangelical if you please, imperialism of *Utopian Socialism*, ending in anarchy. Which of the two will win? Let us hope neither, but that the world will belong to science. "Cruel, but necessary science of struggling and of conquering:" for, if things come out this way, there will be again a chance for the spirit that inspired the classic civilization of France, a civilization based on rational and humane principles. As

soon as clear thinking and keenness of intellect are restored, France's days will have returned.

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Before ending let us add that the warning against not only the blind admiration for German writers, but against the adoption of the so-called German methods in French universities had started before the war. The stir created in 1911 by Agathon's (Tarde et Massis) *L'Esprit de la Nouvelle Sorbonne* has been often recalled recently; and if the denunciations have become more violent since the war, there have also been some people who thought that tabooing excessive; they could give as an argument the disagreement that existed as to which German authors were particularly objectionable. E. g., many agreed that Nietzsche's following in France has been nefarious, while others declare that Nietzsche has been misunderstood and, moreover, that he was as much a despiser of Germany as any writer since his time. There is quite a literature on that subject. While Claudel, Lotte, and Benda exorcize Nietzsche, Goethe and Kant, not to speak of Luther "who is with the Devil" (Claudel), Henri Bois, in *Kant et l'Allemagne*, frees Kant of the accusation of being a precursor of Pan-Germanism and the "inspirer of the military philosophy invoked by Germans to justify their misdeeds," and Alphonse Aulard, in *La Paix Future d'après la Révolution Française et Kant*, recalls the plan for universal peace laid out by Kant. Lasserre, in a special little book on *Le Germanisme et l'Esprit Humain*, condemns Kant, Schelling, and Fichte, but recommends Goethe, Heine, and Nietzsche. While C. Bonnet, *l'Âme du Soldat* (chap. III), in his meekness, welcomes them all—he is almost Romain-Rollandist.